



PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG AND AP

# As smart as she's sassy



*Lily Allen writes her own tunes and calls her own shots*

BY RICARDO BACA  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, DENVER

Lily Allen has never been one to shy away from biting sarcasm or explicit frankness. In some songs the British pop starlet disses by way of thinly veiled compliments, and in others she straightforwardly tells you exactly what is stuck in her craw.

Allen's latest single, *Not Fair*, is delightfully blunt as it tells the story of a man who is perfect — until she gets him between the sheets. As Allen laments her lover's horizontal inabilities in childlike awe, the star — who writes all of her lyrics and co-writes the music — reveals why she is such a special enigma in pop music.

"There's just one thing that's getting in the way/When we go up to bed you're just no good — it's such a shame ... It's not fair, and I think you're really mean."

Allen could have related those sentiments a million ways. But she tells him he's mean instead of pulling an Alanis Morissette and hanging him out to dry. She's verbally wicked without being cruel, and she writes an entire song about sex while staying smart and very coy relative to the kind of lyrics often heard on the radio these days — and that's not an easy charge.

"It's not that sexually explicit," Allen said last week via telephone from England. "She's just talking frankly. Guys are more explicit in hip-hop about the goings-on in the bedroom. Some people say, 'But it's too graphic' — well it's not really, compared to other music out there."

Allen sees it as a double standard. "It's important in this day and age for women to take control and ownership of their sexuality," Allen said, "and that's what I'm doing here."

At 23, Allen is wise beyond her years — something often credited to her showbiz upbringing, her dad is an actor/musician and her mom is a film producer. And while that no doubt contributes to her knowing approach to celebrity, it's clear Allen is as smart as she is sassy.

Allen's second record, *It's Not Me, It's You*, was released in February with the meandering, plainspoken pop brilliance of lead single *The Fear*. Allen was writing about being incredibly famous, sure. But whereas her first record positioned her as this cocky starlet, her sophomore effort mixes a real vulnerability with her British assuredness.

How do we know it's real? Because unlike Britney Spears and the Pussycat Dolls, Allen's name appears on the writing credits for each of her songs.

"I wouldn't be doing this if they weren't my songs," Allen said flatly. "I wouldn't have any interest in it. When I'm onstage, I need

to believe what I'm singing. And if somebody else has written the song, I wouldn't be able to carry it off with any conviction."

Many artists echo that opinion, but Allen might be fiery enough to actually believe it. She is Lily Allen, hear her roar.

"People always talk to me about *American Idol* and *Pop Idol*," Allen said, "but they've got nothing to do with music. It's TV, and that mainstream manufactured pop music, it's made for a certain purpose. But it's not the same thing that I do or Kate Nash does or MIA does. It's a different thing."

Can Allen, a mainstream pop star, get away with ridiculing mainstream manufactured pop stars? Apparently.

And she does it by rattling off some of the hottest female musical exports from the UK in the past decade. Nash, who has been called Allenesque, has her own quirky way of weaving a story — often about men, relationships and self-examination. MIA isn't as lyrically dynamic as Nash or Allen, but her ability to create beat-based soundscapes with carefully chosen producers is right up there with Justin Timberlake and Jay-Z.

"Us females, we've made it quite obvious that we can do it all just as well, if not better, than the boys," Allen said.

Like MIA with Diplo, Allen has found her "musical soul mate" in producer Greg Kurstin, the keys man behind indie buzz band the Bird and the Bee. Whereas she worked with a number of producers (including hitmaker Mark Ronson) on her breakthrough debut, *Alright, Still*, she stuck close to Kurstin for the entirety of *It's Not Me, It's You*.

"He's like a young Burt Bacharach, and I'm (Hal David) — or better yet, I'm Elton and he's Bernie," Allen said. "He's very much involved ... and I'm totally inspired by him."

Allen doesn't write before going into the studio, she said. ("If I come in with something preconceived, then it sounds like that," she said.) Their writing process involved Kurstin behind a piano playing various chord progressions and Allen on the sofa with pen and paper, telling him to stop when she connected with something he was playing.

When asked what she thinks about their creations, Allen quickly replies, "It's absolutely brilliant" — but then she quickly recoils, revealing her vulnerabilities and penchant for straight talk.

"No, I'd have to say that I didn't think about it too much," she said. "If you like it, you like it. If you don't, you don't. I'm doing this project by project, so my next album will be something completely different."

## [ CLASSICAL DVD REVIEW ]

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Following last Sunday's historic Prague speech by US President Barack Obama envisioning a world free of nuclear weapons, no classical work could currently make more appropriate viewing than US composer John Adams' most recent opera, *Doctor Atomic*, issued on DVD by Opus Arte last year.

It features the run-up to the testing of the atom bomb in the New Mexican desert on July 16, 1945. At its center is J. Robert Oppenheimer, the cultured but troubled scientist who led the project. But Oppenheimer isn't shown as a modern Faust figure, selling his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge, but something more modern — a short-tempered neurotic opposed by invocations to Vishnu, Native American rain dances, and extensive poetic quotations that are used as backdrop to the whole hideous story.

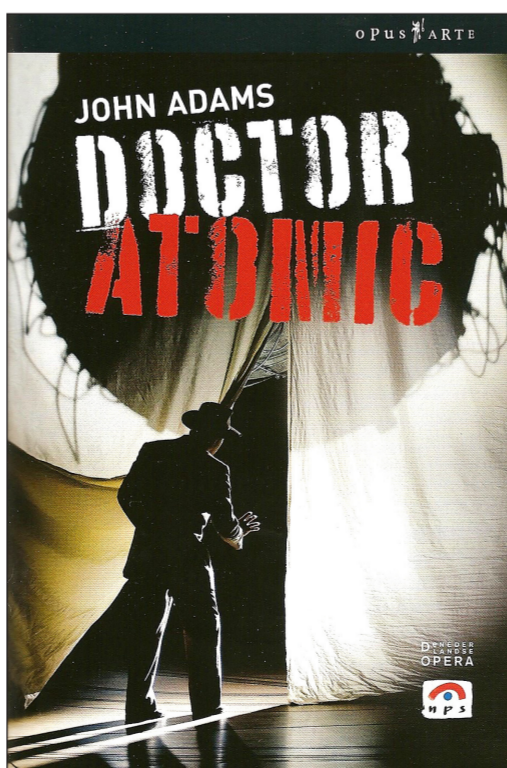
And it is presented as hideous. The subsequent bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are prefigured early on by a discussion of the US' decision to select targets with a high concentration of workers' houses, and not to give Japan any advance warning. And a half-hour interview with director and librettist Peter Sellars, the most extensive of several bonus items, makes no bones about the work's essential meaning.

Art cannot parallel the unspeakable horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he says. But the

continued existence of these weapons, all subject to possible accidental or deliberate use, and last year on the back burner of public awareness, is at the heart of *Doctor Atomic*. It was Sellars himself who assembled the libretto, a montage of recently declassified documents, Native American prayers, and poems by, among others, Baudelaire, John Donne and the 1930s pacifist and feminist Muriel Rukeyser.

*Doctor Atomic* is Adams' third opera on a politically charged theme, following *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991) on the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship by Palestinian terrorists in 1985, and *Nixon in China* (1987). It was initially a co-production of the San Francisco Opera, the Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Nederlandse Opera in Amsterdam, and this DVD was put together from Amsterdam performances given in June 2007. It has subsequently received a different production from the Metropolitan Opera, New York, as well as being staged by the English National Opera in London.

Adams' music is particularly suitable to opera. It's far more dramatic, for example, than Philip Glass' operatic writing, mesmerizing though that often is. There are no melodies as such, but in their place Adams uses just about everything he can find — sirens, bells, computer-generated sounds — with rhythms that surge onwards, and counter-rhythms that flicker back and forth underneath. It's a style that reinforces



**DOCTOR ATOMIC**  
Composer: John Adams  
Librettist and director: Peter Sellars  
Opus Arte OA 0998 D (two-DVD set)

the fundamental drama, as well as the intensity of the characters' feelings. Its success becomes even clearer once one begins to realize just how inappropriate to the subject matter melodies would actually be.

You'd think that a libretto such as Sellars provides, lacking conventional dialogue, would inhibit characterization. But this isn't the case. Many strongly delineated characters emerge — the ruthless general Leslie Groves (Eric Owens), the scientist Edward Teller (Richard Paul Fink), the dissident scientist Robert Wilson (Thomas Glenn), the Oppenheimers' Tewa Indian maid Pasqualita (Ellen Rabiner) and, most impressive of all, Oppenheimer's wife Kitty (Jessica Rivera).

Gerald Finley has made the role of Oppenheimer his own — he's sung it in all the productions so far. With his broad-brimmed hat and relentless drawing on cigarettes, he isn't the cultured polymath who was proficient in six languages including Sanskrit. Instead, he's a nervous, authoritarian figure whose tense physical presence covers a repressed emotional and imaginative life. The implication is that it's these tense, over-rationalistic figures who now pose the greatest threat to mankind that it has ever known.

The inner Oppenheimer, however, is revealed in two scenes. One is where he's making love to his wife, who is quite as much a mother-goddess figure as Pasqualita, both distrusting the catastrophic interference with nature by the males

of the piece. And another is where he pours out John Donne's sonnet *Batter My Heart, Three- Person'd God* as an act-concluding solo aria.

The stage picture features from time to time the New Mexico skyline, the bomb with its maze of exterior wires suspended center-stage, the Oppenheimers' living-quarters, and a variety of scientific controls with their knobs, dials, flashing lights and T-shirt-clad attendants. The uncertain weather (a historical fact), with its fast-moving clouds and flashes of lightening, adds to the drama.

The opera is characterized by continual interest. There are dancers, for instance, rare in a Sellars production, and here often looking like people fleeing in panic. And somehow all the disparate elements — the found texts and the eclectic music — manage to cohere into an exceptionally persuasive whole.

The text, shown sometimes at the bottom of the screen and sometimes at the top, is available in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Dutch, and there are many short bonus items featuring Adams, the Amsterdam rehearsals, the main soloists (who introduce themselves), as well as the long interview with Sellars.

Is this, then, a contemporary masterpiece? Yes, quite possibly. So when will we be seeing a production in Taiwan? Probably not any time soon. The opera being offered this summer by the National Symphony Orchestra is *Carmen*, albeit in an apparently strong new production.